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<b>Authors(s)</b>	Meaney, Gerardine
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# Waking the Dead: Antigone, Ismene and Anne Enright's Narrators in Mourning

GERARDINE MEANEY

And yet how otherwise had I achieved  
A name so glorious as by burying  
A brother?<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting in 2008 on the link between her groundbreaking work on gender and her more recent work on war, Judith Butler proposed a relationship between liveable and grievable lives: 'it is very often a struggle to make certain kinds of lost life publicly grievable'.<sup>2</sup> This essay takes Butler's exploration of the 'politics of mourning' as its starting place for a reading of *The Gathering* and of the short story, 'My Little Sister' from *Taking Pictures*.<sup>3</sup> While *The Gathering* concerns a sister's mourning for her brother, 'My Little Sister' chronicles a woman's bewilderment and grief at her sister's death. Both explore 'what it means to understand certain lives as more precarious than others', and both are narrated from the position of 'those excluded from official public discourse' who 'somehow are still talking'.<sup>4</sup> This essay asks if the mournful narrators of these fictions can be understood in terms of the myth of Antigone and 'to what extent ... can Antigone figure for us [in] the position of the speaker who is outside of the accepted discourse, who nevertheless speaks, sometimes intelligently, sometimes critically, within and against that

discourse?'<sup>5</sup> What does it mean to narrate from this edge where discourse meets death and difference? These fictions of mourning and survival are written in that aesthetic territory on the borderlines of what Julia Kristeva describes as the 'true-real' where the outside of language manifests itself in language,<sup>6</sup> a territory which Jean-François Lyotard made paradigmatically postmodern, where that which cannot be represented is present in representation.<sup>7</sup> They also challenge the terms of the theoretical definitions of this territory. For if Enright's fiction inhabits these spaces, where madness, psychosis and death are predicted, it also postulates the possibility of exceeding that paradigm, reconfiguring it with the force of the desire to 'be able to live'.<sup>8</sup>

This essay proposes a reappraisal of Antigone's relationship with her sister, Ismene, so often dismissed as a cypher for conventional femininity, and reads Enright's mournful narrators in terms of that relationship. Ismene is a more complex figure than she initially appears. She fears to act with her sister and counsels her to act more in accordance with the social expectation of femininity: 'My poor, fond sister, how I fear for thee!' She does not sacrifice herself for her brother or what is due to her mother, as Antigone does. She is, at least initially, a conventional rather than a heroic, singular woman. 'We must remember, first', says Ismene:

that we were born women, as who should not strive with men; next, that we are ruled of the stronger, so that we must obey in these things, and in things yet sorer. I, therefore, asking the Spirits Infernal to pardon, seeing that force is put on me herein, will hearken to our rulers. For 'tis witless to be over busy.

There is a hint in that reference to using one's wits, that Ismene is a pragmatic woman rather than a willingly submissive one: 'A hopeless quest should not be made at all', she argues. She has no appetite for self-destruction and she identifies herself as weak: 'to defy the State, — I have no strength for that'. Antigone considers her sister 'guilty of dishonouring laws which the gods have established in honour' and aligns her own honour with death: 'I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living.' Ismene's response to her sister's declared hatred of her for her weakness is surprising: 'though thine errand is foolish, to thy dear ones thou art truly dear'. Ismene's loyalties are with her living sister rather than dead brother. When Antigone is condemned by Creon, it transpires

that self-preservation is not Ismene's overwhelming principle, for she tells her sister, 'now that ills beset thee, I am not ashamed to sail the sea of trouble at thy side', and there are circumstances in which she is prepared to give up her life for another: 'Sister, reject me not, but let me die with thee', she pleads with Antigone. When the latter scorns her belated desire to die, Ismene exhibits loyalties and strengths which have been obscured by her earlier common sense. This has been dismissed as cowardice by commentators who have tended to follow Antigone's judgement of contempt on her sister.

When Antigone speaks, in perverse obedience to Creon's law 'she defies that law', and, like Veronica in *The Gathering*, her speech exceeds 'the law that governs acceptable speech'. Veronica observes: 'I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. I don't even know what name to put on it.'<sup>9</sup> Inhabited by the Real which has so uncertain a hold upon reality, unable to put a name on it, but talking all the same, Veronica rehearses the theoretical impasse characteristic of current theoretical debates which argue Antigone's significance as both the limit of symbolic power and the excess which can challenge it, the possibility and the impossibility of change. This essay will argue that Enright's narrators in both *The Gathering* and 'My Little Sister' exceed that impasse and that they do so because, like Ismene, they retain their attachment to life.

While 'My Little Sister' and *The Gathering* are stories about the dead, they are primarily concerned with how to live, though they are not staged as a triumphant reassertion of the narrators' egos over the drives towards death that destroy their siblings. Enright's narrative mode is characteristically an uncanny doubling of the first person:

As I write, I look out of the window and check with the corpse I have sitting in the Saab at the front gate. He is always there (it is always a he), a slumped figure in the front seat who turns out, on examination, to be the tilting headrest. But even though I know this, I am drawn to his stuffed, blank face, and wonder why he should be so patient. He lets his gaze rest endlessly on the dash, like a man who is listening to the radio and will not come into the house.<sup>10</sup>

This is the ultimate first-person, plausible narrator of realist fiction and

its opposite, for nothing could be further from the unified and unifying ego. The phrase, 'As I write, I look out of the window', effects the conventional occlusion of authorial voice and novelistic artifice by the first-person narrator who speaks, acts and even writes within the fiction. The second part of the sentence completely undoes this convention: 'and check with the corpse I have sitting in the Saab at the front gate'. This is not simply an untrustworthy narrator or a perfectly realized impersonation of insanity, however. The next sentence reverses the movement from the sane and familiar to the psychotic. 'He is always there (it is always a he), a slumped figure in the front seat', it begins madly: 'who turns out, on examination, to be the tilting headrest', it ends sanely.

In this one narrative persona there is a consciousness whose reality is a psychotic symptom and a clear-headed and critical narrator who 'on examination' knows and names her distorted view of reality. They are neither polarized nor even in conflict: 'even though I know this [that 'he' is a headrest], I am drawn to his stuffed, blank face, and wonder why he should be so patient'. The corpse symptom is domesticated, a man waiting outside his comfortable suburban home listening to the radio, but not entirely so for this activity implies that he neither wants to go in nor is wanted there. The narrative voice is not, in the end, at home with its own madness: 'I do not actually want him in the house', but she does not wish to banish it entirely as yet, and indeed derives some comfort from it: 'that does not mean I am happy to see him always in my car, this man who talks to me quite bluntly of patience and ability to endure'.<sup>11</sup> The symptom is personified as the locus of the narrator's sanity, outside waiting, not yet home, quintessentially *unheimlich* (uncanny). This disorientating and compelling narrative voice, with neither the subjectivity of the first person nor the objectivity of the third, is crucial in Enright's fictions' oscillation between the mundane and the menacing, as when Veronica in *The Gathering* describes her sister 'Kitty – a woman weirdly like my little sister, though much too old'.<sup>12</sup> This dynamic of unease gives even the most quotidian scene the atmosphere of a good ghost story, the sense that something is going to be revealed but that it will not, in any conventional way, make sense. The drive towards psychosis and death is countered by the desire to live again, but living requires an accommodation with the truth that madness reveals.

In *The Gathering*, the narrator describes her style of interior decoration in her 'Tudor-red-brick-with-Queen-Anne-Overtones' house:

I started with all sorts of pelmets when we moved in, even swags. I wanted the biggest floral I could find for the bay window at the front – can you imagine it? By the time I had the stuff sourced, I had already moved on to plain Roman blinds and now the garden is properly 'grown in I want ... nothing. I spend my time looking at things and wishing them gone, clearing objects away.

This is how I live my life.<sup>13</sup>

Enright's descriptions of objects and places evoke those of another occasionally surreal minimalist, Muriel Spark, a key conduit of the influence of the 'new novel' on English language fiction. Spark was a dazzling exponent of the technique of dislocating externalization, where objects and the external world are described in almost psychedelic detail and clarity and the internal world of her characters not described at all. The effect of this is very similar to the paradox at the heart of Enright's descriptive style, where 'things' are looked at in detail and at length as a way of 'clearing objects away'. The heroine of Spark's 1973 novel, *The Hothouse by the East River*, defines the technique, in describing the bafflement of her therapist: 'He's looking for causes and all I'm giving him are effects'.<sup>14</sup> Spark's acrobatics over the abyss are nonetheless sustained by an architecture of omniscience. Author-ity (however parodic or fictional) persists in the implied third-person omniscient narrator, tantalizingly and powerfully present precisely because we cannot help looking for causes and all she is giving us are effects. While Enright's novels often evoke the depths of their narrators' subjectivity, which Spark eschews, there is no sense in *The Gathering* or 'My Little Sister' that this internal space can be fully mapped, or that it enjoys a stable boundary from the external world. In Enright's fictions its symptoms occasionally become objects, like the headrest man, and objects exhibit an intentionality often missing from subjects, like the headrest ghost, 'still game ... like a thousand mechanical friends in a thousand cartoons'.<sup>15</sup> Observing the landscape through the train window as she goes to fetch her brother's body, Veronica tries 'to find the line along which the landscape holds still and changes its mind, thinking that travel is a contrary kind of

thing, because moving towards a dead man is not moving at all'.<sup>16</sup> In the contrary relationship here between subject and object, stillness and movement, mind and matter, the causes implied are quite as opaque as the effects.

This withholding of causes is the central narrative device of 'My Little Sister'. The mystery of why Serena contracts anorexia haunts her older sister, who is left without an explanatory narrative and leaves the reader similarly stranded:

I went through her life in my head. Every Tuesday night before the goddam therapy, I sifted the moments: a cat that died, my grandmother's health, Santa Claus. I went through the caravan holidays and the time she cried halfway up Carantoo hill and sat down and had to be carried to the top. I went through her first period and the time I bawled at her for stealing my mohair jumper. The time she used up a can of fly-spray in an afternoon slaughter and the way she placed horsey on my father's bocketty leg. It was all just bits. I really wanted it to add up to something but it didn't.<sup>17</sup>

There is an easy way to read this story in contrast to *The Gathering*. The loss of the sister cannot be ritualized, translated into the public world in even the limited way that the loss of the brother is in the novel when his sister bears witness, offering us the kind of explanation that remains tantalizingly out of reach in 'My Little Sister'. This is to miss the point, for in both cases the truthful telling of the stories by the narrator demands the same ambiguity, an acknowledgement that the lost siblings remain an enigma. The implied depth of the subjective experience of the dead is terrifying, threatening to return to engulf the survivors, who bear witness but are incapable of an authoritative narrative which would close the border between the living and the dead, the present and the past. *The Gathering* opens with the impulse to tell and the impossibility of being sure of what story to tell: 'I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event.'<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Enright's work challenges the distinction between postmodernism and realism in fiction: the narrative's realism resides in its self-reflexive uncertainty. This is not the residual modernism

which remains integral to much Irish writing and Irish writers' self presentation. Enright's humorous dismissal of Nabokov as an immature taste is typical: 'I used to think Nabokov was brilliant when I was in my early 20s, I thought he was the business – all those beautiful sentences, all this very refined yearning – and now I just think he's a boring old narcissist. He speaks not at all to my life now.'<sup>19</sup> Her appropriation of Joyce as an honorary woman writer, who 'writes domestic and introspective books, not the slightest bit socially aware',<sup>20</sup> is equally humorous. On the one hand, humour is Enright's device for the undermining of cultural authorities; on the other, her insouciance in the face of the canon is a deadly serious act. According to Lyotard, modernism puts forward the unrepresentable 'only as the missing contents'.<sup>21</sup> The psychic and stylistic economies implied by Enright's narratives are not organized around any such fetish. In 'My Little Sister', the refusal of an originary trauma which the narrator can even partially recover makes the author a powerful, resistant presence in the story, a withholder of comprehension analogous to the lost sister who never does explain herself: 'with Serena you are always asking yourself what went wrong, or even, Where [sic] did I go wrong? But believe me, I am just about done with all that – with shuffling through her life in my mind.'<sup>22</sup> Bearing witness may be a burden in *The Gathering*; in 'My Little Sister' the inability to finish Serena's story means her loss is never over: 'I am trying to stop this story, but it just won't end.'<sup>23</sup> This narrative without an ending oscillates between self-defence and guilt. Recalling bringing her little sister to the bus stop on her own school lunch break, the narrator is obliged to clarify that this 'is not me complaining, it is me saying that she was cared for endlessly, by all of us'.<sup>24</sup> On one level the story accepts the fact that some acts are definitive, some losses absolute. The death of the sister marks the point at which reality is marked by the absence of the Real, where life is marked by death and the socio-symbolic order cannot obscure the limits of comprehension, nor the power of what cannot be said, nor human mortality: 'So, she died. There is no getting away from something like that. You can't recover. I didn't even try. The first year was a mess and after that our lives were just punctured, not even sad – just less, just never the same again.'<sup>25</sup>



The older sister's mourning process is characterized by intermittent attempts at self-vindication: 'there are just some things you can not do for a child. There are some things you can not help.'<sup>26</sup> The narrator searches in vain for a cause, a reason for her sister's insanity. First she remembers a brush with mortality, when the two little girls witnessed a car accident as children, then an encounter with a flasher. Neither incident nor the encounters with death and sexuality they initiate have seemed serious enough to act as originary traumas for the extremity of the little sister's symptoms, not least because they were also experienced by the older, surviving sister. The narrator acknowledges: 'I'm scraping the barrel here. We had a great childhood. And I'm fine, that's the bottom line. I'm fine and Serena is dead.'<sup>27</sup> Survival is as incomprehensible as death and is equated with guilt, 'nothing was enough, and everything was too late'.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the protagonist of *The Gathering*, this narrator cannot manage to be properly haunted, possibly because the little sister is so overwhelmingly present in her absence. She has never really left the land of the living so she can hardly come back from the dead. In a sense the anorexic is a ubiquitous shadow of femininity, a modern icon of feminine self-hatred, of alienation, 'weighed down' by the western tradition of denigration of the material and the body.

Yet, this particular sister is resolutely not a textbook anorexic:

They say anorexics are bright girls who try too hard and get tipped over the brink, but Serena sauntered up to the brink. She looked over her shoulder at the rest of us, as we stood and called to her, and then she turned and jumped. It is not too much to say that she enjoyed her death. I don't think it is too much to say that.<sup>29</sup>

The narrative does not fit. The story rehearses a variety of narratives which would translate the unbearable reality to a story with cause and effect; the psychological one tried out with the trauma stories, the gothic one of the murderous boyfriend occurring to the narrator long afterwards when she reads of a murderer with the same name as her sister's boyfriend. Neither of them are remotely adequate to what has happened. What is left is a gap in reason, a fracture in reality, in time and in generation, like the encounter with the dying Serena after one of her disappearances:

Then one day I saw a woman in the street who looked like my gran, just before she died. I thought it was my gran for a minute: out of the hospice somehow ten years later and walking towards St Stephen's Green. Actually I thought she was dead and I was terrified – literally petrified – of what she had come back to say to me. Our eyes met, and hers were wicked with some joke or other. It was Serena, of course. And now her teeth were yellow as butter.<sup>30</sup>

The relationship between the sisters here can be read as analogous to that of Antigone and Ismene, but the mourning is that of sister for sister. The little sister plays the role of resistance, precisely mapping out the path of self-assertion as living death. Her surviving sibling is an agonized and haunted Ismene: 'Thou canst not say that I did not protest.' In 'My Little Sister', this protesting narrator seeks to shelter her sister from the real, but in the ninety-one days after she first left home she somehow became part of it, a harbinger not just of death but unreality: 'She was mysteriously gone from the bed across the room, she was absolutely gone from the downstairs sofa, and the bathroom was free for hours at a time. Gone. Not there. Vamoosed.'<sup>31</sup>

Serena's refusal of food is initially a refusal of the mother's nurture, of the mother as origin of life, and so the maternal becomes conflated with death:

My mother, especially, was infatuated by her absence. It is not enough to say she fought Serena's death, even then – she was intimate with it. To my mother, my sister's death was an enemy's embrace. They were locked together in the sitting room, in the kitchen, the hall. They met and talked, and bargained and wept. She might have been saying, 'Take me. Take me, instead.' But I think – you get that close to it, you bring it in to your home, everybody's going to lose.<sup>32</sup>

Again the logic of the *unheimlich* takes over, with Death taking up residence in suburban sitting rooms. There is a kind of reversal of the psychoanalytic identification of the maternal and death drives here. In Freud's *Das Unheimlich*, he identifies the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar',<sup>33</sup> explicitly identifying the fear of being buried alive as

the source of the most powerful affects of the uncanny because it inverts the desire to return to the womb. In an association which is relevant to a reading of the myth of Antigone, condemned to be buried alive, Freud identifies the mother's body with the place of death and the force of attraction of the maternal with the death drives. In this framework, both Veronica's and Antigone's affiliation to their mothers' 'ancient impulse',<sup>34</sup> to enact the rituals which will return their dead brother to the family, is identified with the desire to dissolve back into the maternal, the desire not to be. This framework is invoked in 'My Little Sister', where the mother is locked in an 'enemy's embrace' with death.<sup>35</sup> The location of this embrace within her suburban sitting room and the mother's attempt to bargain with her enemy, to effect substitutions, challenges the paradigm, however. The scene is doubly uncanny. It affects 'the alteration of a small detail in a well-known picture that all of a sudden renders the whole picture strange and uncanny'<sup>36</sup> which Žižek identifies as the characteristic source of the uncanny. It dislocates 'what was once well known', the psychoanalytic paradigm for understanding the repression of the maternal within an Oedipal framework, and makes it strange in the figure of the mother raging at the mortality of her daughter. This maternal subject very far from that which has been mythologized in Jocasta, the mother of Antigone and Ismene as well as Oedipus.

Perhaps it is this multiplication of feminine subjects raging at the limits of the symbolic and the inexorability of the Real as death that forces the story towards its un-ending. The final paragraph encapsulates and exceeds the rage of the living against the dead who have abandoned them, the guilt of survival and the bitter acknowledgment that the anorexic is a scapegoat, like Oedipus, for a sin of unknowing:

even now, I find myself holding my breath in empty rooms. Yesterday I set a bottle of Chanel No.5 on the dressing table and took the lid off for a while, I kept thinking ... about those ninety-one days, my mother half crazed, my father feigning boredom, and me, with my own bedroom for the first time in years. I think of Serena's absence, how astonishing it was, and all of us sitting looking at each other, until the door opened and she walked in, half-dead, with an ordinary, living man in tow. And I think that we made her up somehow, that we imagined her. And him too, maybe

— that he made her up, too. And I think that if we made her up now, if she walked into the room, we would kill her, somehow, all over again.<sup>37</sup>

In this narrative, grief and incomprehension are inconsolable. The older sister cannot move on from the fact of her sister's absence, which she finds embodied even in her daughter's eyes. In the absence of a compelling narrative to make the 'bits ... add up to something',<sup>38</sup> Serena continues to have effects precisely because she has no cause.

In contrast to the bewilderment of the narrator in 'My Little Sister', in *The Gathering*, the central protagonist's tragedy is that she knows why her brother could not live, though she did not know she knew: 'It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realize it. And for this, I am very sorry too.'<sup>39</sup> Her 'innocence' of the reality of what she saw has made her guilty. In reparation she takes on the role of Antigone, tending to her dead brother: 'This is how I live my life since Liam died. I stay up all night. I write, or I don't write. I walk the house.'<sup>40</sup> Like Antigone, she observes rituals at her mother's behest, resenting her sister Bea's preoccupation with what 'Daddy would have wanted'.<sup>41</sup> Veronica organizes the return of Liam's body, though the bureaucracy she has to contend with to arrange his burial according to maternal tradition are rather more benign than Creon:

The British, I decide, only bury people when they are so dead, you need another word for it. The British wait so long for a funeral that people gather not so much to mourn as to complain that the corpse is still hanging around ... They do not gather until the emotion is gone.<sup>42</sup>

Enright has herself stated that she has 'been fairly radical in wondering what those definitions are, what the constructions are of gender, of nationality and of identity in general. I haven't come to any answers.'<sup>43</sup> *The Gathering* challenges the fundamental building block of these constructions:

All big families are the same. I meet them sometimes at parties or in pubs, we announce ourselves and then we grieve — Billy in Boston, and Jimmy-Joe in Jo'berg, doing well — the dead first, then

the lost and then the mad. There is always a drunk. There is always someone who had been interfered with, as a child. There is always a colossal success, with several houses in various countries, to which no one is ever invited. There is a mysterious sister. These are just trends, of course, and, like trends, they shift. Because our families contain everything and, late at night, everything makes sense.<sup>44</sup>

Veronica reconfigures this story: 'I have disturbed the ghosts. They are outside the door of my room, now, as the ghosts of my childhood were; they are behind the same door. Their story is there ... These are my nightmares. This is what I have to walk through to get downstairs.'<sup>45</sup> She endures 'Christmas in Hades', but, unlike Antigone, she returns from the underworld and re-makes her family to accept the truth of her brother's loss to gain his son, 'Oh there's no doubting the child ... It's Liam. To the life.'<sup>46</sup> This is not an easy substitution of the innocent boy with the Hegarty eyes for the ruined man: 'it is too uncanny'.<sup>47</sup>

In re-writing the Antigone story, among others, *The Gathering* addresses the central paradox of that story, much rehearsed in philosophical, psychoanalytical and literary discourse.<sup>48</sup> Antigone is a mythic figure of feminine resistance, iconic of the defiance of totalitarianism throughout most of the twentieth century and, for post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, representative of the refusal of symbolic order. However, recent critiques of this understanding of the myth have argued that her 'initial "No!" to Creon is entirely consistent with, and binds her to, her family destiny and paternal law'.<sup>49</sup> Veronica's role in *The Gathering* problematizes this polarized understanding of Antigone as either political or familial, and of the polarization of feminine identity into either submissive immanence figured in Ismene or radical transcendence. Veronica carries out the ancient duty of the women in the family to take care of the dead: 'Some ancient impulse of my mother's means she wants Liam's body brought back to the house before the removal, so Liam can lie in state in our ghastly front room. Though come to think of it, I can't think of a better carpet for a corpse.'<sup>50</sup> The incongruity of the front room and Veronica's consumerist disdain for its carpet are integral to the temporal games the novel plays. This, like all good ghost stories, is about the refusal of the past to be past. In this respect, it is also like the story of

Antigone, who, while she has been appropriated to signify the possibility of a different future, was originally destroyed for honouring an archaic attachment to the old rules of kinship over the new rule of the state. *The Gathering* exceeds these formulations, as any attempt to 'bear witness' must, by making Veronica both Antigone and Ismene. Veronica's declaration that, 'I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here. I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all',<sup>51</sup> is very much the perspective of Ismene. Her dedication to truth and the dead is pure Antigone: 'The truth. The dead want nothing else. It is the only thing that they require.'<sup>52</sup>

Antigone tells Ismene, 'thou chosed'st life, and I to die'. The positions represented by the sisters in Sophocles' characterization are quite simply affiliation to life, defeat and deceit, or death, fidelity and truth. Enright's narrator combines both positions and outlives them. Perhaps this is the root of the power of the novel's ending, itself another beginning in life's cycle of beginnings: 'then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now.'<sup>53</sup> Antigone never gets her own life, nor can Ismene live without her. Paradoxically it is the fact that Veronica encompasses the ordinary weakness of an Ismene, who does not 'want a different destiny',<sup>54</sup> as well as the strength of Antigone that facilitates telling the untellable truth. Veronica's ability to go mad is essential to her ability to bear witness and to recover a sane life. For Veronica not only exceeds the familial, she exceeds the singularity of a lone female voice against the law of silence. Her dead brother's injunction to give truth to the dead conjures up Uncle Brendan, 'lost to Largacytl and squalor. How many years of it? He probably died wondering who he actually was.'<sup>55</sup> She interrupts her journey home with her brother's body, diverting from the familial narrative, and gets off the plane to drive to find St Ita's, the psychiatric hospital where Brendan was an inmate, and finds the stories of her brother and her uncle are part of a larger story when she encounters the grave of the inmates: 'There are no markers, no separate graves. I wonder how many people were slung into the dirt of this field and realize, too late, that the place is boiling with corpses, the ground is knit out of their tangled bones.'<sup>56</sup> This encounter with the ghosts of the mad paradoxically marks the beginning of Veronica's sanity. The headrest

ghost has been banished by Kitty: 'I look back, helpless, at Kitty in the front seat of the car.'<sup>57</sup> At this moment of helplessness and strange sisterhood, Veronica is at one with the dead: 'They have me by the thighs. I am gripped at the thighs by whatever feeling this is. A vague wind. It clutches at me, skitters between my clothes and my skin. It lifts every hair. It grazes my lip. And is gone.'<sup>58</sup>

This sense of being ambushed by the dead reprises a recurrent element in the story which initially inspired Enright when she began writing *The Gathering*: Joyce's 'The Dead'.<sup>59</sup> The novel is careful to establish the 1925 scene in a very Joycean geography. Great Denmark Street where the Belvedere Hotel is located, is two minutes' walk from Leopold and Molly Bloom's putative address in Eccles Street. Charley drives off to a pub called The Hut in Phibsboro, which parallels the route of the funeral procession to Glasnevin in Ulysses, but the reference to ghosts is a most explicit reference to 'The Dead':

A spent coal slips in the grate with a whispering 'chink'.

Here come the dead.

They hunker round the walls and edge towards the last heat of the fire: Nugent's sister Lizzie; his mother, who does not like being dead at all. Nugent's ghosts twitter soft and unassuaged, while Ada's make no sound at all.

Why is that?

She is an orphan. Of course.<sup>60</sup>

In 'The Dead', the sweet sadness of ballads and songs evokes desolating memory and the loss of love in the past becomes inextricable from the destruction of love in the present. In that case, the moment of epiphany is a moment of communion with the dead, not recovery of life as in *The Gathering*. In the century between Joyce's and Enright's narratives of the burdens of memory and knowledge, the resurgence of traumatic memory has become a fetish of Irish cultural practice and commentary. The construction of familial relations as the capillary network of tragic consequence has become a defining feature of Irish drama and fiction. Very often the beautiful narrative edifices built on recovery of memory obscure the ongoing realities of those whose memory of the terrible past is recuperated into a cultural trope. This location of events in living

memory in an incomprehensibly remote past is perhaps an understandable form of disavowal given the horrific nature of the abuse of children, but it is also a politically expedient one. The cultural agonizing around the Ryan Report<sup>61</sup> has not been translated in Ireland into, for example, the practical, necessary, expensive and urgent business of improving services and protection for children in the present (unaccompanied minors are routinely misplaced by the care system, their fate outside the narrative of an Ireland that has left the callous past behind). In effect, the symbolic confrontation of past abuse displaces the necessity of doing anything about it in the present. Butler's comments that it is 'a struggle to make certain kinds of lost life publicly grievable' resonant powerfully with the discovery in 2010 that the Irish Health Service Executive did not record the numbers of children who died in its 'care', even in the twenty-first century. In this context, the past really is in the present tense.

In Enright's work the relationship between the past and present is unstable, but it is not simply that the past trauma interrupts the present and must be put in its proper place, recuperated into a linear narrative of past and present, cause and effect. In *The Gathering* nothing is more suspect than closure. It is opening up new stories, not concluding them, that makes it possible to go on into the future. It is significant that, as in 'My Little Sister', temporal distortion is a key technique and experience in *The Gathering*. The distant past can be in the present tense: 'Here is my grandfather, Charley Spillane, driving up O'Connell St to his future wife in the Belvedere Hotel.'<sup>62</sup> *The Gathering* both uses and critiques the structure of psychological narrative and the technique of finding causes in memory and resolving the effects of past trauma. It also asks political questions about the way in which the recovery of memory substitutes for engagement with its consequences in the present. In contrast to the Irish narratives which keep abuse narratives resolutely in the past, *The Gathering* forces us to confront both the suffering boy and the bitter ruined addict, to complicate our identifications and challenge our sympathies, to make the process of acknowledgement of the past as difficult as it needs to be if it is to be more than a new form of denial. In Hegel's formulation, influential on Lacan and Irigaray, Antigone is the servant of history, who loyally fulfils the role of translating the dead into



the national past. National identities are very much part of the fabric of 'The Dead', but the relationship between the living and the dead generation is not imagined as the terrible abstraction of the nation, but in the embodied intimacies of social relationships. Loyal to those the nation cannot abstract – its others, the forgotten dead in the unmarked graves, the drowned brother, the mad uncle – Veronica proposes a radical continuity. Seeing her brother in his son, she coalesces the narrative distortions of memory and time into nature's own temporal doubling, the continuity of eternal recurrence and eternal difference that begins again with the narrator's possible pregnancy at the novel's end. *The Gathering's* ending offers more than a moment of epiphany as the narrator falls back to an earth which cannot contain her.<sup>63</sup> 'In the 80s and 90s, people talking on the radio about abuse were not just breaking a silence, they were actually forming new words', Enright says. 'It's not just that they were articulating something that could not be said out loud, it was that they didn't even have the words in their minds.'<sup>64</sup> Veronica understands that without that public discourse, her private revelation could not have occurred:

Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr Nugent. But I would never have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too.<sup>65</sup>

Being sorry is, of course, not enough. The question posed by Enright's narrative is whether having found the words, the reality can be changed. *The Gathering* negotiates between the demands of the dead for truth and the desire of the living 'to be able to live', between the desires of Antigone and Ismene. It is an uncannily hopeful novel, which ends convincingly with a future.

Enright's mourning narrators engage in complex negotiations between memory, truths, and living which end inconclusively, as they should. If 'My Little Sister' rehearses the polarized relationship of Ismene and Antigone, giving voice to the bewildered ordinariness of the former, the uncertain narrator of *The Gathering* fuses the potentialities of the tragic

daughters of Oedipus. Antigone rejects Creon and the state he rules. Ismene tries to negotiate between their rival absolutes. For all her declared weakness in Sophocles' original text, Ismene becomes not just a speaking subject, but also a political one. When Creon asks her, 'wilt thou also confess thy part in this burial, or wilt thou forswear all knowledge of it?', she replies, 'I have done the deed, – if she allows my claim, – and share the burden of the charge.' Antigone will not allow this false claim, despising her sister as 'a friend in words' not deeds. Ismene lies and it is not cynical to say that this is what makes this woman of words political. She pleads for clemency not for herself but for her sister, attempting to deploy an emotional register equally unacceptable to Antigone and Creon, whom she asks, 'wilt thou slay the betrothed of thine own son?' Creon's inability to respond in that register leads him to the fate to which he condemned Antigone: his 'life is but as death'. Her position – initially fearful but moved to defiance by cruelty, torn between loyalty and wit, attempting to appeal to the humanity of the powerful – is not heroic and it does not prevail against a dictator. It is nonetheless socially and psychologically viable, unlike that of Creon or Antigone, and it is capable of change. The mourning sister in 'My Little Sister' reaches the point where Ismene realizes that life 'bereft' of Antigone – and what she represents – is an unreasonable burden.<sup>66</sup> In *The Gathering*, she moves beyond it.

## NOTES

1. All *Antigone* references are to the MIT Internet Classics Archive (<http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>) for ease of reference. Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. R.C. Jebb, MIT Internet Classics Archive, MIT, accessed 1 July 2010.
2. J. Butler, 'Antigone's Claim: A Conversation with Judith Butler', an interview by P. Antonello and R. Farnetti, *Theory & Event* 12, 1 (2009), Project Muse, [http://muse.jhu.edu.eproxy.ucd.ie/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v012/12.1.antonello.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.eproxy.ucd.ie/journals/theory_and_event/v012/12.1.antonello.html), accessed 1 July 2010. Butler discusses her books on Antigone in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), and the aftermath of the September 11th attacks in *Precarious Lives: The Power of Mourning and*

- Violence (London and New York: Verso, 2004).
3. A. Enright, *The Gathering* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007) and *Taking Pictures* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008). 'My Little Sister' was originally published as 'Little Sister' in *Granta* 75: *Brief Encounters* (2001).
  4. Butler, 'Antigone's Claim: A Conversation'.
  5. *Ibid.*
  6. J. Kristeva, 'The True-Real', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi (Oxford: Blackwell: 1986), pp.214–37.
  7. J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.81.
  8. Enright, *The Gathering*, p.260.
  9. *Ibid.*, p.1.
  10. *Ibid.*, p.132.
  11. *Ibid.*
  12. *Ibid.*, p.153.
  13. *Ibid.*, pp.36–7.
  14. M. Spark, *The Hothouse by the East River* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p.48.
  15. Enright, *The Gathering*, p.148.
  16. *Ibid.*, p.41.
  17. Enright, 'My Little Sister', in *Taking Pictures*, p.61.
  18. Enright, *The Gathering*, p.1.
  19. Enright quoted in S. Rustin, 'What Women Want', *Guardian*, 15 March 2008.
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.81.
  22. Enright, 'My Little Sister', in *Taking Pictures*, p.55.
  23. *Ibid.*, p.63.
  24. *Ibid.*, p.55.
  25. *Ibid.*, p.62.
  26. *Ibid.*, pp.55–6.
  27. *Ibid.*, p.57.
  28. *Ibid.*, p.60.
  29. *Ibid.*, p.59.
  30. *Ibid.*, p.62.
  31. *Ibid.*, p.63.
  32. *Ibid.*
  33. S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. D. McLintock and H. Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003), p.124.
  34. Enright, *The Gathering*, p.42.
  35. Enright, 'My Little Sister', in *Taking Pictures*, p.63.
  36. S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge,

- MA: MIT Press, 1992), p.53.
37. Enright, 'My Little Sister', in *Taking Pictures*, pp.64–5.
38. *Ibid.*, p.61.
39. Enright, *The Gathering*, pp.172–3.
40. *Ibid.*, p.36.
41. *Ibid.*, p.42.
42. *Ibid.*, p.182.
43. A. Enright, 'Anne Enright Reading from her Novel', Boston College Irish Seminar, Boston College Front Row, Boston College, 27 September 2007, <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/enright/>, accessed 1 July 2010.
44. Enright, *The Gathering*, pp.184–5.
45. *Ibid.*, p.215.
46. *Ibid.*, p.245.
47. *Ibid.*, p.246.
48. For commentary on this debate, see, for example, M. de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jottkandt (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009); I. Parker, *Slavoj Zizek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Y. Stavrakakis, 'The Lure of Antigone: Aporias of an Ethics of the Political', *Umbra*, 1 (2003), pp.117–29.
49. R. Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p.129.
50. Enright, *The Gathering*, p.42.
51. *Ibid.*, p.260.
52. *Ibid.*, p.56.
53. *Ibid.*, p.261.
54. *Ibid.*, p.260.
55. *Ibid.*, p.156.
56. *Ibid.*, p.160.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*, p.161.
59. See J. Joyce, *Dubliners* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008).
60. Enright, *The Gathering*, p.32.
61. The Ryan Report, published in 2009, is the findings of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, which gives an account of the extensive and systematic abuse of children in Irish state institutions from 1936 onwards. The report can be accessed at <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/>.
62. *Ibid.*, p.30.
63. In this regard the ending of Enright's novel has interesting parallels with E. Ní Dhuibhne's *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2007), which also appropriates a tragic heroine and then reverses her tragic ending into a new

ANNE ENRIGHT

beginning.

64. Enright quoted in S. Rustin, 'What Women Want'.

65. Enright, *The Gathering*, pp. 172-3.

66. When Creon admonishes her that she 'hath newly shown herself foolish' in her loyalty to her sister, Ismene replies, 'such reason as nature may have given abides not with the unfortunate, but goes astray ... What life could I endure, without her presence?'